

## Zimbabwean plantation Workers' Conditions of Work and Service, a Case of Manicaland Province.

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### Abstract

*The colonial state the world over has been characterized as brutal and exploitative in that it denied the indigenous peoples from benefiting from their resources. In the case of Zimbabwe in particular, the settlers during the greater part of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took recourse to primitive accumulation of wealth as the hoped for Eldorado's failed to materialize. Following the failure of the "Second Rand" by the turn of the century, the settlers turned to agriculture. This resulted in a well calculated and managed process of land expropriation from the indigenous Africans. Thus agriculture became the backbone and corner stone of the colonial economy. African conditions of work and service in this sector have been regarded as the worst compared to other sectors and this history is well documented. The nationalist movements in their struggle against the colonial state pledged to improve the conditions of farm and plantation workers should they gain power. Was this promise fulfilled? This is the major question this paper grapples with. Basing on evidence gathered from plantations in Manicaland, it is argued in here that conditions of plantation as well as other farm workers have remained pathetic.*

**Keywords:** Plantation workers, Struggle, Conditions of service, Expropriation, Uhuru

### Introduction

The history of plantation workers in Zimbabwe is unique for one notable thing, its marginalisation. Since the genesis of the colonial period, these workers have been marginalized in all spheres of life. Their incomes, accommodation, health, education, representation and visibility have

been the worst of all sectors of the economy. A very thin literature exists on agricultural workers in general and plantation workers in particular (Clarke, 1977; Loewenson, 1995; Sachikonye, 1997). These previous studies, however, tended to focus on workers conditions of service ignoring other important areas such as the correlation between the working conditions and labour relations and collective job action.

### **Methodological Considerations**

The study makes use of a number of research methods that are combined. The historical nature of the study meant that historical analysis or document analysis was the prime method of gathering evidence. In this regard primary records produced by Labour Relations Officers (LRO) in Chipinge and Mutare were perused. Their correspondences with their superiors in Harare were also analysed. To augment data from document analysis the researchers also carried out extensive interviews in the plantations in Chipinge such as Southdowns, Zona and Drinkwater. Workers were asked about their terms and conditions of work, and more fundamentally the kind of struggles they engaged in, in order to improve their conditions of work. They were asked to highlight their successes and failures in the struggles to better their working conditions. To corroborate findings from workers the views of management on employees' determination to improve their lot were gathered.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was done within the framework of the Rational Choice Theory (RCT). In almost all the former colonies independence was expected to usher in an improvement in the living and material conditions of all the formerly oppressed people. In the absence of an improvement in their working and material conditions, workers felt it was incumbent upon themselves to fight for an improvement in their conditions. The RCT is a framework for understanding and often modeling social and economic behavior. While for most people rationality means 'sanity', 'a thoughtful clear-headed manner' or 'knowing and doing what's healthy in the long term' in this context and used in a narrower sense rationality simply means that an individual acts by balancing costs against benefits to arrive

at action that maximizes personal advantage ( Bicchieri, 2003). This theory was used as a barometer to determine whether workers used the most cost – effective means of realizing their goals. This was done by asking the plantation workers some of the ramifications of the job actions that they staged in their struggle for better terms and conditions of work.

### **Historical Background**

In colonial times, through repressive legislation, the state compounded the plight of African workers and agricultural and plantation workers in particular. Until the promulgation of the 1982 Employment Act, the Masters and Servants Act (1902) remained the chief legislation governing labour relations in the plantation sector. Under the rubric of the Act, plantation workers were not recognized as employees but property of the employer (Masters and Servants Act, 1902).

There is not much published literature on the plantation workers. Writers such as Saunders (2001) who have documented these strikes have concentrated on industrial workers only. There is not even a single sentence that refers to these strikes amongst the plantation workers. Contemporary researchers continue to suffer the same legacy of marginalizing plantation workers. This article seeks to narrow this gap in mainstream labour studies by focusing on industrial action among the plantation workers. In this paper, plantations are defined as large estates where cash crops of high value like coffee, tea and cotton are grown on a large scale. Artificial forests are also included. Usually a fairly large resident labour force operates on these plantations.

### **Workers conditions**

As far back as the colonial period, plantation workers, like other oppressed African workers in other sectors of the economy, did take recourse to collective job action, although the state legislative framework had quite a restrictive effect. As already alluded to earlier on, plantation workers were governed within the parameters of the Masters and Servants Act that did not recognize them as employees. Under the provisions of this Act, it was also a criminal offence for a “servant to disobey the lawful orders of an

employer" (Raftopoulos, 1997:56). As a result of this Act, overt resistance among the plantation workers during the colonial era was made almost impossible. However, when conditions became unbearable, workers found themselves with no option but to engage in collective job action so as to draw the attention of the employer to their plight.

In 1964 workers at Stapleford in Manicaland refused to go out to work in the rain. In response, the state did not hesitate to invoke the powers of the Masters and Servants Act. All the workers who had participated in this job action were charged under the Act and fined (Interview with Shakespeare, Stapleford (14/6/2010)). Such draconian state responses did, however, not cow the workers into total submission. Where such overt resistance was impossible, just like the situation with mine workers and workers in other sectors of the economy, they resorted to what I.R Phimister and van Onselen (1997:6) refer to as "resistance in the shadows" or hidden forms of resistance. These included actions like arson, loafing, feigning illness, "stupidity", "stealing" and desertion among others.

Saunders (2001: 135) estimates that no less than 200 strikes involving over 16000 workers occurred between 1980 and 1981. Astrow (1983; 175) also says that at least 172 000 hours of work were lost due to the strikes which occurred between March and June 1980 alone. Plantation workers were not spared by these waves as strikes as implied by the dearth of published literature. There were, for instance, work stoppages in 1980 at Zona Estate, Gwindingwi sawmill and Highlands Estate among others. The major cause in the three cases was the issue of poor remuneration (Labour Relations office Records, Mutare, 1981-1985)). At Zona the strikers were tea pluckers who complained that the tasks were too much and the wages too low. At Gwindingwi the strike was triggered by the failure of management to pay the minimum \$70 00 announced previously by the then Minister of Labour, Kumbirai Kangai (LRO Records, Mutare, 1981-1985).

The 1990s witnessed even more strikes by both plantation workers and farm workers. The major factor behind this increase in strikes was the

adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) as the country's economic blue-print by the government in 1991. Among the conditionalities imposed by the IMF and the World Bank the major financiers of the programme were; the removal of government subsidies on food and other commodities, deregulation of the labour market and a cost recovery programme which required government to introduce user fees in education and health (Saunders, 2001:150).

A combination of deregulation of price controls and the devaluation of the dollar resulted in workers' wages stagnating or declining. Plantation workers' wages, which had remained amongst the worst further worsened with the adoption of ESAP. According to the Labour Relations Office records, Mutare and Chipinge, 1995 and 1997 were the worst years in terms of collective job action by plantation workers. For 1997, the most important factor was the crush of the Zimbabwean dollar. (Saunders, 2001:161). This resulted in astronomical price increases which led to food riots countrywide.

According to Sachikonye (1997:122) most of the wage increases received by workers in the 1990s were below the inflation rate. Wage increases failed to keep pace with the inflation rate. As a result, many workers especially the lowly paid plantation and domestic workers sank deeper into poverty. Average wage increases awarded from 1990 to 1994 reveal an alarming gap between the latter and inflation rate. The average wage increases in 1990 were 15 percent, in 1992, 13 percent; 1993, 15.0 percent and 12.0 percent in 1994. In the same period inflation rate was 17.5, 36 and 20.8 percent respectively (Sachikonye, 1997:122).

Featuring prominently among the major causes for resorting to job action were issues related to wages, working conditions, unfair labour practices, ignoring of workers' grievances by management, racial discrimination, protective clothing, accommodation and health provisions among others. With runaway inflation following the removal of subsidies and the devaluation of the dollar, plantation workers found themselves receiving wages inadequate to meet even their basic needs such as food, decent

clothing and education. According to the Manica Post (28/04/95), Tanganda estate workers went on strike for about a week in 1995. The overarching issue here was the delay by management to effect a 15 percent wage increment announced by the National Employment Council (NEC) for the agricultural industry. On 26 March 1996, workers at Glenwood Timbers in Chipinge also engaged in a collective job action. Cited as the major cause of this job action was the underpayment of wages (Report on the Glenwood Timber Strike, LR Office, Chipinge, 01/04/96).

The years 1997 and 1998 did not see an improvement of the situation in terms of collective job action. In October 1997 plantation and farm workers throughout the country went on a general strike. The workers were refusing a 20 percent salary increment announced by the government which fell short of their expectations of a minimum of \$840 00 per month (The Herald,10/1097). The Eastern Highlands tea plantations in the Honde valley experienced devastating collective job actions on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1998. About 300 workers of the company went on strike to pressure management to adjust their wages by 30 percent over and above the 40 percent wage and salary increments announced by government in 1997. Grade one tea pluckers and supervisors at the company's estates were receiving mockery wages of \$571 00 and \$647 00 respectively. The demand by the workers for a 30 percent increment adjustment within a short period of receiving a salary increment should be understood in the context of runaway inflation that eroded the value of these increments as soon as they were announced.

Unfair labour practices by management were another cause of job action by plantation workers. Such unfair practices included the abuse of NSSA contributions by management, refusal by management to engage in in-house negotiations, arbitrary calculations of overtime and unexplained wage deductions among others. At the end of January 1998, workers at Aberfoyle Tea estate engaged in a collective job action over management's non-forwarding of NSSA contribution numbers to the workers. On taking the issue further to NSSA offices, workers were told that there had not

been any contributions coming from their employer for the previous six months. Quite a similar case also led to a strike at Katiyo Tea Estate in 1997. In this case, workers had been contributing to an ARDA pension scheme. However, when the scheme was discontinued, no refunds were made to the contributors. Further, management was refusing to engage in in-house negotiations.

Arbitrary calculation of overtime rates as well as unexplained wage deductions culminated in a demonstration at Chimbonyi estate in Chipinge. About 31 permanent workers marched to the Chipinge LR Offices on 28 March 1996. Three years earlier, workers at New Year's gift had also walked 25km to the same LR offices to demonstrate over the company's impossible job tasks.

Accommodation also featured prominently amongst the causes of collective job action by plantation workers. Some improvements were witnessed in workers' accommodation following independence, especially from 1990 onwards as government threatened to designate white owned land whose owners continued to neglect their workers' living conditions particularly housing. Some farmers, nevertheless, ignored these threats, which seemed empty. However, the workers took upon themselves to have these conditions rectified. One of the causes of strikes at Tanganda Tea estates in April 1995 was the state of accommodation. At Ratelshoek, also owned by Tanganda, workers complained that their houses were very old (60 years) full of cracks and inhabitable.

At South Downs estate, living conditions for some of the employees were deplorable. In the workers' letter of notice to the LR Officer to go on strike, accommodation was cited as the chief reason. According to their letter of notice, 314 of their houses were of pole and dagga. Further, some contract and permanent workers still continued to be piled into dormitories. Sanitary conditions at the same estate were grossly inadequate. In some instances, more than 15 families were reported sharing a single latrine.



Lack of protective clothing and racial discrimination also featured in workers' grievances. In their letter of notice to go on strike, South Downs employees also cited racial discrimination by white management against blacks. Black management was being retrenched and replaced by whites. White managers were bought more expensive cars than black managers if they were provided at all. Workers were even more irked by the fact that when they were finding it almost impossible to have electricity installed in their houses, some white managers afforded the luxury of providing electricity and clean water to their pigs. On 1 June 1998, employees of Small Deal estate downed tools over a related case. In this case, workers were demanding the removal of the crops manager, Mr. Kruger whom they accused of poor working relations with the people.

At Gleenwood estate it was found out that lack of protective clothing was one of the workers' major grievances leading to a strike on the 26th of March 1996. At one of Tanganda Tea' estates, a plumber with the company for over twelve years told a hearing that he had never been given protective clothing despite the unsightly and health hazard nature of his job.

### *The process*

The process of striking among the plantation workers did not differ from that of other workers in other industries. The chanting of revolutionary songs, picketing as well as the destruction of property has become part and parcel of the strike baggage in Zimbabwe. These incidents were noted during plantation workers' strikes. During the Clearwater strike of January 1993, workers became violent and ended up throwing stones at the manager's house, man-handling the manager and preventing vehicles from entering the factory. During the October 1997 general farm workers' strike cases of violence were reported. At Southdown non-striking workers were beaten to join the strike. A Hearing delegation was also barred from leaving the office at the end of a meeting, which the workers felt, had failed to resolve their grievances.



### **The Results**

Despite the workers' recourse to job action over genuine grievances, in many instances they achieved very little. State legislation, particularly the Labour Relations Act (1985) protected the interests of capital (employers). The Labour Relations Act (LRA), following in the footsteps of the Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA), 1959, prohibited collective job action in what it called "essential services". Mark Shadur (1994) argues that as a result of such legislation, in practice, legal collective job action was virtually prevented even in non-essential industries by the nature of the dispute settlement procedures.

When about 400 employees took part in a strike at Petrunella coffee estate, on 12 October 1995, the action taken by the state through its Labour Relations Officers, clearly indicates that it was not prepared to entertain any strike and loss of production to capital. On his arrival on the estate, B. Muvindi (LRO) told the striking workers in uncompromising terms that the strike was illegal. As laid down in the 1985 LRA, workers were supposed to have given 14 days notice of their intention to strike giving reasons. The 14 days period was considered enough to find solutions to workers grievances. However, even when no consensus was reached or solutions found, workers were still not supposed to engage in collective job action. The state simply sought to legalize strikes. When the workers refused to comply with Muvindi's order to go back to work, they were told that their employment had been terminated. Chimbonyi coffee estate employees who also engaged in a peaceful demonstration suffered the same fate. The employer was given full authority to dismiss them for having failed to follow the laid down procedures (LRO Report, 28/03/96).

In the case of Southdown Holdings, although workers had an impressive list of grievances when they refused to back to work as ordered by the LRO, the Minister, gave a disposal order. This empowered the employer to dismiss the workers (LRO Chipinge to PLRO, Harare, 06/03/98). Efforts by K Fusire, the Principal LR Officer and A Kasiyamhuru, Senior LR Offer, to resolve the case had failed. Under the LRA such matters were referred

to the Minister of Labour. If he/she felt that what was done by his juniors was enough, she/he could issue a disposal order. This gave the employer the authority to dismiss the striking workers.

However, despite losing in most cases or coming out worse off after a strike, there were some cases when some achievements were gained. At Small Deal, for instance, the striking workers managed to have Mr. Kruger suspended for 10 days pending investigations over his racial practices Report on Small Deal, 1998). At Aberfoyle Tea estate management accepted and apologized for the misuse of workers' NSSA contributions. Consequently, a cheque was written for the outstanding figure. In the 1995 Tanganda and the 1996 Gleenwood workers' strikes a 15 and 10 percent increment was awarded across the board respectively (The Manica Post 28/04/95). However, measured against the rate of inflation, these wage increments were quite a mockery. When these increments were awarded, for instance, the rate of inflation had jumped to around 50 percent.

### **Conclusion**

The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) proved to be quite robust in explaining the actions and struggles of plantation workers in their determination to improve their working conditions. The history of plantation labour and agricultural labour in Zimbabwe, in general, has been one of marginalization spanning back right into the colonial era. The attainment of independence did not do much to bring these workers into mainstream society and labour studies in particular. In the colonial times, plantation as well as agricultural workers were the most disadvantaged in terms of their condition of service, legislation governing them and coverage by researchers. Plantation and Agricultural workers of whom the bulk is of foreign origin have been sidelined in the land redistribution exercise. Those who have been inherited by the new owners, have no prospects of a better future as the new land owners are even worse off financially to consider ameliorating the conditions of their employees. In the research domain, there has been a rush by scholars to investigate the impact of

the land redistribution process on the farm workers. No effort has yet again been made so far to investigate workers' responses to this phenomenon. As this paper has demonstrated, there is need for a paradigm shift by researchers. It is essential that scholars shifted from this parochial and sympathetic view of plantation and agricultural workers and also consider their efforts in making and shaping their conditions vis-à-vis capital and the state.

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